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America suffers from a substance abuse problem. Maintaining our national industries and our jobs requires us to consume millions of tons of fossil fuels each and every day. Unfortunately, our addiction to fossil fuels comes with a high price, perhaps even higher than what we pay at the pump or for our monthly utility bills. Consuming these chemicals also comes with what economists call externality costs -- invisible, indirect expenses widely shared by human society.

A 2011 Harvard Medical School study, for example, reported that the environmental and health care related expenses of coal production and consumption cost the United States as much as \$500 billion every year. Pollution-related illnesses reduce our workers' productivity, while purchasing foreign oil weakens our dollars -- a second economic externality. Our taxpayers must also pay a high bill -- projected at more than \$50 billion annually -- for the U.S. military to protect the supply of Middle East oil that reaches our shores. America's food supply is also vulnerable to the price and availability of fossil fuels.

Another set of externalities are associated with changes to Earth's climate caused by humans burning fossil fuels and releasing carbon dioxide and methane into our atmosphere. As the planet's average temperature increases, we'll experience more extreme weather events such as hurricanes, blizzards, floods, and mega-droughts. These place a heavy toll on state and local economies — and on the quality of human life. We'll not only pay the external costs of climate change now, but we'll pass an environmental debt down to future generations of Americans, diminishing their quality of life and economic opportunities.

Fossil fuels have an effect on our economic vitality. If we wish to help solve our current deficit crisis and reduce the possibility of even worse financial challenges in the future, we must be honest with ourselves and admit the high price we pay for our fossil fuel-addicted economy. Fortunately, we have solutions in the now emerging clean energy and energy efficiency industries that can help us wean our economy from its dangerous dependence on fossil fuels.

California is building the road to this new clean energy economy. Our efforts to set rigorous limits on vehicle emissions and an ambitious new law to require California to receive 33 percent of its electricity from renewable sources such as solar and wind by the year 2020 are at the forefront of the country's clean energy transition.

Silicon Valley and San Joaquin Valley have provided important leadership in cleaner energy resources and energy efficiency. Companies such as Google and Adobe are models of good energy stewardship. Silicon Valley is America's hot spot for a burgeoning electric vehicle industry, solar power research and development, and biofuels science exploration. San Joaquin Valley is showing America's family farms that they can sustain their proud agricultural heritage by generating electricity from wind turbines and by generating liquid fuels from biomass.

Our economy can gain much from the leadership demonstrated by the people of California -- and particularly those in the urban Silicon Valley and the agricultural San Joaquin Valley. Let the Golden State prove that the United States can use cleantech and energy efficiency to wean ourselves off of our national chemical dependency on fossil fuels. By encouraging cleantech innovations to stimulate new industries and new jobs, Californians can lead America to gain energy freedom and build a brighter tomorrow for ourselves and for future generations.

REP. JERRY McNerney, D-Stockton, and MARTIN CHEEK co-wrote the book, "Clean Energy Nation: Freeing America from the Tyranny of Fossil Fuels." They wrote this article for this newspaper.